

How to Fix the News

Newspaper circulation continues to decline. The top-selling paper in the country, *USA Today*, distributes only 2 million copies a day (half, no doubt, placed outside hotel room doors). Around the same number, with an average age of 71, watch *The O'Reilly Factor* nightly, with the number decreasing as the audience dies off. Everyone quietly concedes the news industry is dying. It's the Internet's fault, they all assure us.

But what if it wasn't? The other day I heard a news program that was so good that I wanted to listen to it again. And I'm not alone — all my friends have been talking about it as well. And while I don't have exact numbers, it seems as popular as any one of those other news outlets. That show? The *This American Life* episode on [The Global Pool of Money](#) — a comprehensive explanation of the housing mess.

There were three things about the show that made it stand out from the rest of the news pack:

It believed in the intelligence of its audience. It didn't try to pander with sex or disasters or quick cuts. It took a serious news story and investigated it thoroughly for a full hour, with only one break. And it didn't try and dumb any of it down — it explained the whole thing, from top to bottom.

It didn't assume you already knew the subject. Most news stories on important topics are incomprehensible to the average person who doesn't know much about their topic. Here's a quote from a random news story about the housing crisis: "They said financial institutions have been unwilling to expose themselves to the mortgage market, and lenders are hesitant to lend to risky borrowers in a declining house price market after the subprime meltdown." Unless you've been following the story (like the reporter, presumably) do you really know what that means? *TAL* instead assumed you knew nothing and explained every component and term so that you actually had a picture of what was going on.

It was done in an entertaining and conversational tone. It didn't treat the news as some important series of facts that had to be seriously conveyed to you. It treated it as something interesting they wanted to tell you about, a story that involved real people's lives (who you got to hear from at length) and was full of genuinely interesting pieces. Look at that news quote above one more time. Can you really imagine someone sitting down and saying that with a straight face?

At first these things may seem contradictory — how can you believe in the intelligence of your audience while assuming they don't know anything? how can you be entertaining and yet still explain a subject? — but the more you think about them you see how well they fit together. Being intelligent doesn't mean you're knowledgeable; it means you're curious. Which means you want to hear the whole story from beginning to end and which means you might actually find it entertaining. And being conversational prevents you from assuming the mask that lets you talk down to your audience while pretending they only need to hear the handful of new facts that you're providing.

In every other field, that kind of formality has been dropped. Even banks run advertisements these days about how their associates will be your friend. And yet the news chugs along with its arrogant formality, watching its audience get older and older, and wondering why its circulation is declining.

Together, these three points seem like the recipe for a genuine news show: intelligent, comprehensive, and entertaining. And yet, I can't think of a single thing that follows them. Surely in an era of desperation and experimentation, the wacky idea of actually respecting your audience has to be worth a try by *someone*. Anyone want to give it a shot?

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May 12, 2008